



**Leslie Torres-Rodríguez, Ed.D.**  
**Superintendent**

Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and distinguished members of the Education Committee:

My name is Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodríguez, and I am the Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools. I write to you in strong support of H.B. 5283, An Act Concerning the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) Grant Formula and the Funding of Other Education Programs.

My district serves nearly 20,000 of the state's K-12 students, including a large number of higher-need students – such as those from economically disadvantaged households and those with limited English language proficiency.

Over the last two years, districts across the state have had to grapple with significant challenges as in-school instruction was disrupted and hybrid learning became the “new normal.” While some districts were able to make this transition seamlessly, many urban districts, like Hartford, struggled to keep our students connected online and continue to provide the services students and families rely on. These circumstances only emphasized the disparities that have existed in our education funding system for many decades.

While federal COVID relief aid has helped us meet student needs during this unprecedented crisis, these one-time funds will soon expire. Without a commitment for full funding of ECS, districts cannot plan for long-term use of these funds. However, if H.B. 5283 is passed and ECS is fully funded in FY 2025, we can begin to use some of the federal ESSER dollars for long-term, reoccurring expenses such as teachers, counselors, and social-emotional supports for students.

Additionally, since the State will fund all public school students according to their needs, H.B. 5283 would eliminate tuition billing to sending districts for students attending out-of-district choice programs. Currently, there are approximately 3,600 Hartford students who attend CREC magnet schools, and another approximately 2,200 resident students who attend other districts through the Open Choice program. For the 2019-20 school year, Hartford Public Schools paid an estimated \$21.2 million in tuition for general education students attending schools of choice. This number is expected to rise even higher if much-needed changes aren't made to Connecticut's education finance system.

Students who leave a school district to attend a choice program are often spread across different schools and grades, so sending districts are significantly limited in our ability to make reductions to staff or other expenses. For example, if Hartford Public Schools sees two children leave one classroom to attend a magnet school, we are not able to eliminate a teacher. Rather, the over-populated class of 29 would simply reduce to 27.

Despite this inability to achieve cost reductions, every year we are required to pay a considerable amount in tuition for students attending out-of-district choice programs. While grappling with already limited resources, tuition billing is simply an additional burden we cannot afford. With the long-term *Sheff* agreement now in place, this is the time for the legislature to present a more sustainable solution.

Most importantly, H.B. 5283 would help address the massive funding inequities that have existed in Connecticut for decades; inequities that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. H.B. 5283 will significantly reduce Connecticut's \$700+ million economic and racial funding gaps that



have disproportionately impacted generations of students in the state's urban communities, like Hartford.

H.B. 5283 represents a clear path toward alleviating the looming fiscal cliff when federal ESSER funding runs out, a more equitable funding system for Connecticut's students, and greater fiscal predictability for schools.

Thank you for your public service, and I urge you to support H.B. 5283 this legislative session.

Sincerely,

Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez  
Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools